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CIA Should Stay Out of Policy

Involvement There Hinders Vital Intelligence-Gathering Role

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Assume that the situation of the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua grows hopeless and that U.S. intelligence sources in the area pass the word to Washington. Can anybody imagine William J. Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, marching to the White House and telling President Reagan that the CIA's not-so-secret war in the region is doomed to failure?

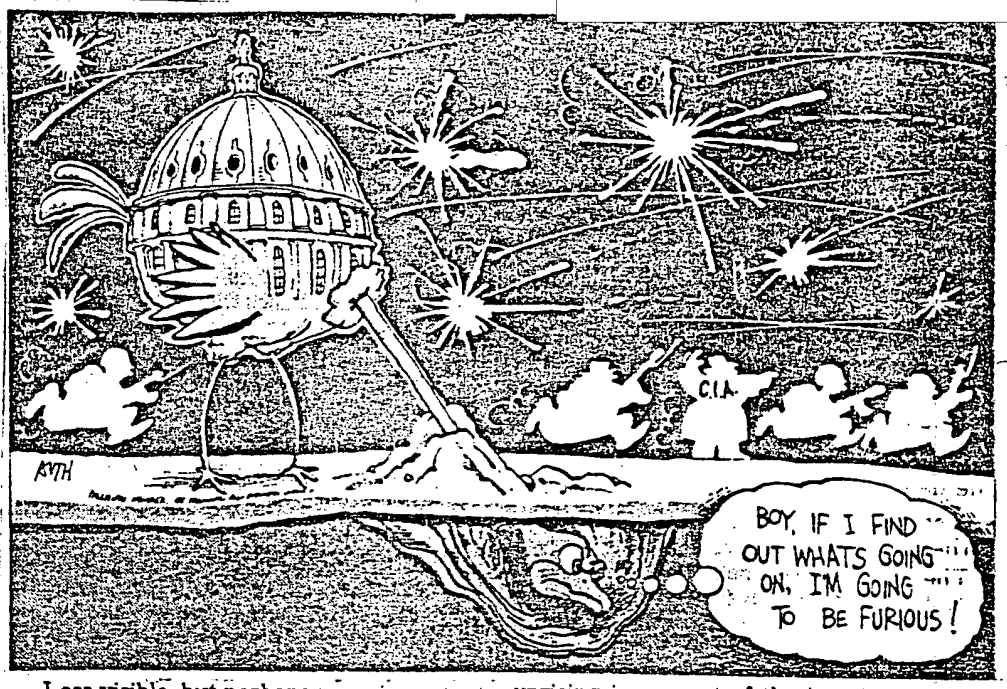
The answer is self-evident, which means that maybe it is time to consider what might be done to discourage CIA chiefs from becoming involved in policy-making.

It is hard for close readers of newspapers or magazines to go longer than a month or two without reading an interview in which Casey assures us that the Boss is on the right track in his policies toward the Soviet Union, the Middle East or Nicaragua. Is that really an appropriate function for the head of the CIA, who by definition is supposed to provide the President and other policy-makers with objective information and analyses on what is happening in the world outside our borders? Surely not.

What we need is a tradition of CIA directors who look an interviewer straight in the eye and say that assessing the wisdom or stupidity of policies being pursued by an Administration in power is none of their business, that their only job is to provide reliable intelligence. It would be nicer still if CIA chiefs would tell Presidents and White House advisers that they would rather not offer advice on policy questions, and would prefer to limit themselves to presenting intelligence that policy-makers need in choosing among alternative actions.

Unfortunately, it's unlikely to happen. There have been notable exceptions, but Presidents tend to appoint CIA chiefs who are personally close and/or politically reliable. Casey is a case in point; he has an intelligence background, but is first and foremost a Reagan man.

Unlike British or Soviet intelligence chiefs, American CIA directors are public figures who appear on television and are interviewed in newspapers. They make speeches and give public testimony before congressional committees. All of this means that they are thrust into the role of advocates for Administration policy.



Less visible, but perhaps more important, is the fact that they can come under pressure to tailor intelligence assessments to support policy. During the Carter Administration, the Senate Intelligence Committee worried that the much-publicized CIA study of Soviet oil production was being manipulated by the White House to develop support for the Carter energy program.

Justly or not, some people in the intelligence community itself charged that Adm. Stansfield Turner, then head of the CIA, was distorting intelligence estimates to make them dovetail with the Carter Administration's foreign policy.

As one critic said at the time, "The great trap of intelligence is to search for evidence supporting your own view . . . . If you have access to policy-makers, you can become sensitized into justifying their decisions." The temptation is especially strong when the CIA chief becomes directly involved in policy-making, and stronger still when the CIA is itself involved in covert operations.

When the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba turned into a deeply embarrassing fiasco for President John F. Kennedy, it was pretty obvious that the failure was due in part to faulty intelligence that overestimated the likelihood of an anti-Castro uprising in support of the invaders. Would the CIA have done a better job if it had not been running the invasion? A lot of people thought so. For a time there was serious debate as to whether covert military operations should be done by the CIA, with the recurring danger of warping the agency's intelligence function, or by special units within the Defense Department.

Nothing was done, partly because there are some good arguments against such a shift in jurisdiction. But the question is still relevant, as demonstrated by the example of Casey and covert operations in Nicaragua.

With some reason, Congress is in another of its periodic bouts of disillusionment with CIA involvement in covert military operations. But the mood will pass. As former Deputy CIA Director Bobby R. Inman once said, "Every Administration ultimately turns to the use of covert operations when they become frustrated about the lack of

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